

Psalms 40:1-11

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

John 1:29-42

Isaiah 49:1-7

God's Calling

1 Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away! The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me. 2 He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me away. 3 And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified." 4 But I said, "I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the Lord, and my reward with my God." 5 And now the Lord says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him, for I am honored in the sight of the Lord, and my God has become my strength – 6 he says, "*It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.*"

7 Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers, "Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."

What an amazing roller coaster of confessions and expectations this scripture offers us today! In a quick summary, Isaiah seems to be renewing his efforts again for God's justice by calling for far away peoples to listen to him and defending why they should heed what he has to say. He tells of how he felt called all his life and found that God even gave him the enthusiasm of tongue and work to struggle for justice in Israel – and yet it seemed that he was not accomplishing anything. And still, God does not give up on him – he is not allowed to give up, even in light of Isaiah's sense of failure in Israel – in fact – God heaps even more onto his plate and says he is to reach the ends of the earth with his message! One could either see this as a tremendously cruel act – or one of great encouragement.

It reminds me of when I had voice lessons and the teacher wanted me to hit a note that was pushing the border of my physical ability – a very high note. I kept screeching to get up there, until he said, "Think that you are singing above it and come down to it." And it worked. I hit the note with ease!

Setting high goals is what God is all about. Helping his human creations to become more than they thought they could be is what our faith is all about. We have Jesus – a human – sent to us to show us that we can strive for what he strove for – a God-like love as a human being. We, like Isaiah are being called to be lights to the nations, which may seem daunting, but aiming for the nations may help us be lights in our present surroundings.

Yesterday was Martin Luther King's birthday and tomorrow is the national day celebrating his life. How perfect to be speaking of extraordinary calls and being lights to the nations at the same time as thinking about this man. He helped guide a nation to justice and still inspires people all over the world today. I want to share with you part of his letter from a Birmingham jail which, to me, sounds almost like it could be straight from Isaiah's text.

Martin Luther King was responding to various criticisms from a group of clergy in response to his and his supporter's actions in Birmingham. One of the accusations was that he was being an extremist, which he at first wasn't pleased about, but then he warmed up to the idea, saying:

Was not Jesus an extremist for love: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you." Was not Amos an extremist for justice: "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream." Was not Paul an extremist for the... Christian gospel: "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus." Was not Martin Luther an extremist: "Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise, so help me God." And John Bunyan: "I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a butchery of my conscience." And Abraham Lincoln: "This nation cannot survive half slave and half free." And Thomas Jefferson: "We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal . . ." So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love?

In this day when we are still reeling from the Tucson tragedy which overshadowed our shock about the Nebraska High school shooting, and the violence all over the world, we need to ask ourselves if we are being extremists for love or hate! Even worse, are we not extremists at all?

Not being an extremist is not responding to our Christian callings. Again, from his letter from a Birmingham jail, Martin Luther King Jr. wrote:

I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical

concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season." Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection . . . We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people.

This great civil rights leader was fully aware of his calling and was criticized for going beyond his hometown with his message – but he was responding to God’s calling, as described in today’s sermon text, to go beyond – to reach higher to strive to go so high you have to come down to hit the notes you had struggled so hard to reach before.

It is true, I believe, that each one of us are called by God. That is what “The Great Commission” in Matthew 28:19 & 20 is all about: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” It is vital that as many people are involved in being extremists for love on this earth in order for God’s Kingdom to come on this earth as it is in heaven.

Because, Martin Luther King Jr. did not act alone - if his followers had not grown in numbers and his influence had not traveled beyond his congregation, we would not be where we are as a nation today in terms of human dignity. And the same goes for Jesus. It is the awareness of truth that is shared by a group of people acting together for love that makes the body of Christ alive today.

This group experience of truth and justice is painfully brought clearly forward with the song, “Singing the Spirit Home” by Eric Bogle. Written in 1986, it is a true story about a young black man being executed in a South African prison for fighting against Apartheid. As they dragged him along the corridor to the gallows, all the other black men from their cells in the prison, started to sing a freedom song to him. It must have been the last sound he heard as they hung him.

They came for him in the morning, an hour before dawning
The pale white moon was waning in the African sky
The cell door flew wide open, they stood looking at him
He saw no mercy in their hearts, no pity in their eyes

As they took him and they bound him, tied his trembling hands behind him
He felt his courage leave him, his manhood disappear
His legs would not support him, so from the cell they dragged him
He sobbed and screamed and cursed them in his loneliness and fear

Chains, chains, chains
How many souls have died in freedom's name
To some it is a way of life, to others just a word
To some it is a snow-white dove, to some a bloody sword
But until the last chains fall, freedom will make slaves of us all

With faces closed and hidden the white guards walked beside him
Indifferent to his pleading - they'd been down this path before
But other eyes were watching, other ears were listening
Other hearts beat with him in his final desperate hour

From the darkness of that prison came the sound of his brothers singing
Courage, their voices told him, you do not walk alone
From their cells beyond the shadow he heard their voices echo
As in love and pride and sorrow they sang his spirit home

Chains, chains, chains
How many souls have died in freedom's name
To some it is a way of life, to others just a word
To some it is a snow-white dove, to some a bloody sword
But until the last chains fall, freedom will make slaves of us all

And their song of hope and freedom, it rang inside that prison
It beat against the iron bars and crashed against the stone
As in their fear and hate they hung him, the last sound that filled his being
Was his brothers singing, singing his spirit home

Courage, brother, you do not walk alone
We shall walk with you and sing your spirit home.

As Isaiah experienced and shares with us today - we all sing each other’s spirit home – that is why we are untied in Christ - God IS calling us to be with each other in love. Amen